

WHEN ROSSITER CUT LOOSE

By SEWELL FORD

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"I set 'em face to face."

As a general thing I don't go much on looks, but I will say that I've seen handsomer specimens than Rossiter. He's got good height, and plenty of reach, with legs branchin' out just under his armpits—you know how when clothes pin fellers are built—but when you finish out the combination with pop eyes and a couple of overhanging front teeth—Well, what's the use? Rossy don't travel on his shape. He don't have to, with popper bossin' a couple of trunk lines.

When he first began comin' to the studio I sized him up for a soft boiled, and wondered how he could stray around town alone without havin' his shell cracked. Took me some time, too, before I fell to the fact that Rossy was wisen' he looked, but at that he wa'n't no knowledge trust.

Just bein' good natured was Rossy's long suit. Course, he cut that help grinnin', his mouth is out that way. There wa'n't any mistakin' the look in them wide set eyes of his, though. That was the real article, the genuine I'll stand for anything kind. Say, you could spring any sort of a josh on Rossy, and he wouldn't squeal. He was one of your shy violets, too. Mostly he played a thinkin' part, and when he did talk he didn't say much. After you got to know him real well, though, and was used to the way he looked, you couldn't help likin' Rossiter. I'd had both him and the old man as reg'ars for two or three months, and it's natural I was more or less chummy with them.

So when Rossy shows up here the other mornin' and shoves out his proposition to me, I don't think nothin' of it.

"Shorty," says he, kind of flushtin' up. "I've got a favor to ask of you."

"You're welcome to use all I've got in the bank," says I.

"It isn't money," says he, growin' pinker.

"Oh," says I, like I was a lot surprised. "Your usin' the touch preamble made me think it was. What's the go?"

"I—'but I can't tell you just now," says he. "But I'd like your assistance in a little affair about eight o'clock this evening. Where can I find you?"

"Sounds mysterious," says I. "You ain't goin' up against any Canfield game, are you?"

"Oh, I assure—" he begins.

"That's enough," says I, and I names the particular spot I'll be decoratin' at that hour.

"You won't fail?" says he, anxious.

"Not unless an ambulance gets me," says I.

Well, I didn't go around battin' my head all the rest of the day, tryin' to think out what it was Rossiter had on the card. Somehow he ain't the kind you'd look for any hot stunts from. If I'd made a guess, maybe I'd said he wanted me to take him and a college chum down to a chop suey joint for an orgy on lichi nuts an' weak tea.

So I wa'n't fidgetin' any that evenin', as I holds up the corner of 2nd street, watchin' the time of day with the round and watchin' the Harlan folks streak by to the roof gardens. Right on the tick a hansom fetches up at the curb, and I sees Rossiter givin' me the wig-wag to jump in.

"Your runnin' on sked," says I.

"Where to now?"

"I think your studio would be the best place," says he. "If you don't mind."

I said I didn't, and away we goes around the corner. As we does the turn I sees another cab make a wild dash to get in front, and takin' a peek through the back window, I spots a second one followin'.

"Are we part of a procession?" says I, pointin' 'em out to him.

He only grins and looks kind of sheepish. "That's the regular thing nowadays," says he.

"What? Tin badgers?" says I.

He nods. "They made me rather nervous at first," he says, "but after I'd been shadowed for a week or so I got used to it, and lately I've got so I would feel lost without them. Tonight, though, they're rather a nuisance. I thought you might help me to throw them off the track."

"But who set 'em on?" says I.

"Oh, I suppose," says he, "not grouchy, mind you, but kind of tired."

"Why, Rossy?" says I. "I didn't think you was the sort that called for P. D. reports."

"I'm not," says he. "That's just father's way, you know, when he suspects anything is going on that he hasn't been told about. He runs his things all the time. And maybe some of them weren't busy, so he told me to look after me."

Well, say! I've heard some tough things about the old man, but I never thought he'd carry a thing that far. Why, there ain't any more sportin' blood in Rossiter than you'd look for in a ribbon clerk. Outside of the little ladylike boxin' that he does with me, as a liver reguler, the most excitin' fad of his I ever heard of was collectin' picture postcards.

Now, I generally fights shy of mixin' up in family affairs, but somehow or other I just ached to take a hand in this. "Rossy," says I, "you're dead anxious to hand the lemon to them two sleuts; are you?"

He said he was.

"And your game's all on the straight after that, is it?" says I.

"Then count me in," says I. "I ain't never had any love for them sneak detectives, and here's where I gives 'em a whiff."

But say, they're a slippery bunch. They must have known where we was headin', for by the time we lands on the sidewalk in front of the physical culture parlors the man in the leadin' cab has jumped out and faded.

"He'll be watchin' on the floor above," says Rossiter, "and the other one will stay below."

"That's the way they work it, eh?" says I. "Good! Come on in without lookin' around or lettin' 'em know you're on."

We goes up to the second floor and turns on the stum in the front office. Then I puts on a pair of gym shoes, opens the door easy, and tiptoes down the stairs. He was just where I thought he'd be coverin' up in the shade of the vestibule.

"Caught with the goods on!" says I, reachin' out and gettin' a good grip on his neck. "No go don't! No gun play in this!" and I gives him wrist a crack with my knuckles that puts his shootin' arm out of business.

"You're makin' a mistake," says he. "I'm a private detective."

"You're a third rate yegg," says I, "and you've been nipped tryin' to pinch a rubber door mat."

"Here's my badge," says he.

"Anybody can buy things like that at a hock shop," says I. "You come along upstairs till I see whether or no it's worth while ringin' up a cop."

He didn't want to visit, not a little bit, but I was behind, persuadin' him with my knee, and up he goes.

"Look at what the sneak thief business is comin' to," says I, standin' him under the bunch light where Rossiter could get a good look at him. He was a shifty eyed low brow that you wouldn't trust alone in a room with a hot quarter.

"Even if it wa'n't, you could never prove an alibi with that face," says I.

"If this young gent'll phone to his father," he goes on, "he'll find that I'm all right."

"Don't you want us to call up Teddy at Oyster Bay? Or send for your old friend Bishop Potter? Ah, say, don't I look like I could buy fly paper without gettin' stuck? Sit down there and rest your face and hands."

With that I chucks him into a chair, grabs up a hank of window cord that I has for the chest weights, and proceeds to do the bundle wrapping act on him. Course, he does a lot of talkin', tellin' of the things that'll happen to me if I don't let him go right off.

"I'll cheerfully pay all the expenses of a damage suit, or lines, Shorty," says Rossiter.

"Forget it!" says I. "There won't be anything of the sort. He's lettin' off a little hot air, that's all. Keep your eye on him while I goes after the other one."

I collared Number Two squattin' on the skylight stairs. For a minute or so he put up a nice little muss, but after I'd handed him a swift one on the jaw he forgot all about fightin' back.

"Attempted larceny of a tarred roof for yours," says I. "Come down till I give you the third degree."

He didn't have a word to say; just held onto his face and looked ugly. I tied him up same's I had the other, and set 'em face to face, where they could see how pretty they looked. Then I led Rossiter down stairs.

"Now run along and enjoy yourself," says I. "That pair'll do no more sleut'in' for awhile. I'll keep 'em half an hour, anyway, before I throws 'em out in the street."

"I'm awfully obliged, Shorty," says he.

"Don't mention it," says I. "It's been a pleasure."

That was no dream, either. Say, it did me most as much good as a trip to Coney, stringin' them trussed up keyhole gazers.

"Your names'll look nice in the paper," says I, "and when your cases come up at Special Sessions maybe your friends'll all have reserved seats. Sweet pair of pigeon toed junk collectors, you are."

If they wa'n't sick of the trailin' business before I turned 'em loose, it wa'n't my fault. From the remarks they made as they went down the stairs I suspicioned they was some sore on me. But now and then I runs across folks that I'm kind of proud to have felt that way. Private detectives is in that class.

I was still on the grin, and thinkin' how real cute I'd been, when I hears heavy steps on the stairs, and in blows Rossiter's old man, short of breath and wall eyed.

"Where's he gone?" says he.

"Which one?" says I.

"Why, that fool boy of mine!" says the old man. "I've just had word that he was here less than an hour ago."

"You got a straight tip," says I.

"Well, where did he go from here?" says he.

"I'm a poor guesser," says I, "and he didn't leave any word; but if you was to ask my opinion, I'd say that most likely he was beavin' himself, wherever he was."

"Huh!" growls the old man. "That shows how little you know about him. He's off being married, probably to some yellow haired chorus girl; that's where he is!"

"What! Rossy?" says I.

Honest, I thought the old man must have gone batty; but when he tells me the whole yarn I begins to feel like I'd swallowed a foolish powder. Seems that Rossiter's mother had been noticein' symptoms in him for sometime; but they hadn't nailed anything until that evenin', when the chorus girl, that's where he is!

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long time. Who else would be likely to marry him? Comet, you don't imagine I think he's an Apollo, just because he's my son, do you? And don't you suppose I've found out, in all these years, that he hasn't sense enough to pound sand? But I can't stay here. I've got to try and stop it, before it's too late. If you think you can be of

any help, you can come along."

Well say, I didn't see how I'd fit into a hunt of that kind; and as for knowin' what to do, I hadn't a thought in my head just then; but seem' as how I'd butted in, it didn't seem no more right that I should stay with the game. So I tags along and we climbs into the old man's electric cab.

"Say," says Rossiter's old man, sizin' 'em up careful, "is it all true? Do you think as much of one another as all that?"

There wa'n't any need of their sayin' so; but Rossy speaks up prompt for the only time in his life. He told how they'd been spoons on each other for more'n a year, but hadn't dared let on because they was afraid of bein' kidded. It was the same way about gettin' married. Course, their bel'n neighbors on the avenue, and all that, he must have known that the folks on either side wouldn't kick; but neither one of 'em had the nerve to stand for a church wedding, so they just made up their minds to slide off easy and have it all through before anyone had a chance to give 'em the jolly.

"But now that you've found it out," says Rossiter, "I suppose you'll want us to wait and—"

"Wait nothing!" says the old man, jammin' his foot down. "Don't you wait a minute on my account. Go ahead with your elopement. I'll clear out. I'll go up to the club and find Ogden, and when you have had the knot tied good and fast you come home and receive a double barreled blessing."

About that time the minister that they'd been waitin' for shows up, and before I knows it I've been rung in. Well, say, it was my first whack pickin' back stop at a weddin', and perhaps I put up a punk performance; but inside of half an hour the job was done. And of all the happy reunions I was ever lugged into, it was when Rossiter's folks and the Ogdens got together afterwards. They were so tickled to get their two freak left overs off their hands that they almost adopted me into the family, just for the little stunt I'd do in bikin' them P. D.'s.

WHERE TO STAND.

(Kansas City Times.)

"Motor cars an' sech air all right," said Farmer Bligh. "But I'll stand by the Missouri river."

"Then be keerful, David," cautioned his spouse, "to stand by his head, not his heels."

NOT EXPERIMENTING.

(Philadelphia Ledger.)

"Can you live on your income in New York?"

"I don't know," replied the New Yorker. "Never tried it yet."

"What size?" asked the young saleswoman, and I had that all pat, for a

"Well, they're sold here," she replied, correctively, jabbing at her hair with a lead pencil.

"The women on the revolving stool in front of the night gown counter turned about and stared steadily right into my face and nudged each other. Some of them made remarks to each other, then smiled saturnally, then looked at me some more. Several of them, somewhat austere looking elderly women, sniffed. Their sniffs told me as plainly as words that they considered me an intrusive, intentionally malignant individual who had come there for the sole and deliberate purpose of annoying women at women's legitimate occupation, which is shopping. Two quite young, frivolous looking young women on stools near the end of the counter snickered audibly, and I caught the word 'Buttinski' from one of them. The reply of this one's companion, 'What sort of night gowns do you wish?' inquired the young woman behind the counter, quite indifferently.

"Oh, any kind," I said, eager to get away, and quite forgetful of my wife's instructions to get plain, inexpensive night gowns.

"Something rather nice?" asked the young woman.

"Oh, certainly, certainly; she'll want them nice—they're for my wife, you know," I mumbled, keen to vindicate myself where no vindication was necessary.

"Hush! for his wife!" I heard one of the austere looking elderly women on a stool near me mutter. "As if a man's wife would permit him to buy night gowns for her. Likely," she took no pains whatever to subdue her tone, and I caught every word.

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